

12-2007

MIXED SIGNALS

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MIXED SIGNALS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Arts

by
Elizabeth Ashmore Snipes
December 2007

Accepted by:
Todd McDonald, Committee Chair
Sydney Cross
David Detrich

ABSTRACT

My oil on wooden panel paintings demonstrate a curiosity and fondness for a traditional subject, the human figure, and utilize a representational vocabulary to examine an interest in current modes of interpersonal interaction. The work has evolved in conjunction with an investigation of contemporary figurative painting with the purpose of translating a traditional genre and subject matter into a present context of remediation and digital social networking. The resulting paintings utilize recurrent art historical themes of the isolated figure and the sublime, and also contribute to a contemporary conversation surrounding painting's relationship to new media and photography in the twenty-first century. In the work, I emphasize a disjunction of conventional figure/ground relationships by disrupting spatial unity, emphasizing chromatic disagreement, and highlighting the disparities between multiple image sources. Thematically, the tensions that exist as a result of these formal discontinuities reflect the complex nature of interacting with people and places in the 21st century, an age when virtual reality often occurs simultaneously with physical reality and interpersonal interactions take place over virtual divides. Further, the work displays a syntactic heterogeneity based on shifts in painted mark making that firmly places it within the discourse of contemporary painting. In support of this body of work, this written thesis document serves to: 1) Illuminate the art historical and cultural factors which inform the work, 2) Explicate the operational tools used to convey my chosen message 3) Examine the function of the paintings relative to an audience. By organizing the document into three chapters, I point to the

cultural, historical, and interpersonal connections, disconnections, and reconnections about which the work speaks.

DEDICATION

I dedicate my studio efforts and this supporting written document to my mother, father, and sister, all of who have supported me emotionally, spiritually, and often financially for the last 26 years. They are my most beloved blessings, and I hope that one day I can return to them what they have so selflessly given to me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis body of work was made possible by the critique, support, and comic relief of my friends, fellow graduate students, and professors at Clemson University. A thorough understanding of my personal work was achieved with the help of my thesis committee members, Todd McDonald, Syd Cross, and Dave Detrich, all of who provided various research materials and topics, challenged me with critique, and encouraged me to hold myself to high standards. Other professors who have been integral to the success of this work are Dr. Andrea Feeser, Andrea Prince, Tom Dimond, and Denise Detrich. Their guidance and friendships contributed immensely to the completion of my thesis body of work, oral presentation and defense, and this written thesis manuscript. My studio-mates, past and present, have helped to cultivate a studio dynamic that promotes a perfect balance of serious studio activity and relaxed conversation. Jillian Ludwig and Mary Pat Hanley, in particular, have provided me with constructive critique and support alongside a profound level of silliness and heart-to-heart conversation. Given a different studio atmosphere, my paintings, work ethic, and disposition would have been much bleaker. I acknowledge them as my driving force in the studio for the last year and one half. To all of you mentioned or implied above, I thank you immensely and acknowledge you as key factors in my work of the present and future.

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I. CONNECT

I am fascinated by the ways in which people interact with other people. The nuance of body language alone impresses upon me a confirmation that we are, as a myriad of collections of cultures and communities, incredible social beings. As a person living in the early twenty first century, I am captivated by the multitude of ways in which we are able to interact with other people and places. As an artist, I make use of art history, particularly the history of figurative painting, as a tool to connect to particular cultural situations of the past. As a painter, these interests ultimately manifest in the form of a two-dimensional painted art object.

Within the medium of oil painting and the genre of the human figure, both of which are attached to extensive sets of conventions and histories, my paintings demonstrate a curiosity and fondness for a traditional subject, the human figure, and utilize a representational vocabulary to examine an interest in current modes of interpersonal interaction. The work exists as a manifestation of interests in contemporary figurative painting and examines the role of mediation and digital social networking in our current cultural context. I explore the complicated existence of multiple modes of current social interaction, noting how their coexistence can be translated into the language of paint. Syntactic heterogeneity correlates with the diverse spectrum of human communication today, whether through direct or mediated avenues. The resulting painting goes beyond simply rehashing trans-historical themes, contributing to a contemporary conversation surrounding painting and pictorial construction in the twenty-first century. Each painting illuminates the emotional, psychological, and social effects

that occur as a byproduct of our time: mental dislocation and psychological connection and/or distance. As each viewer interacts with the paintings, they are prompted to consider their own unique positions in the realm of contemporary social interaction.

Throughout art history, images of the human figure have continually resurfaced as subject of existential and humanistic discovery. Observing shifts in the depiction of the figure in art often parallels cultural shifts. One such shift of particular significance to my work is the atmosphere that surrounded the Industrial Revolution. With rise of western industrialism in what was formerly an agriculturally based society, labor shifted from working within the natural landscape to an increasingly industrial urban landscape, recontextualizing the human experience of nature. This cultural shift is reflected in paintings by European Romantics, who answered this perceived loss of nature with a desire to emotionally and spiritually reconnect to its mysterious and sublime qualities. This desire and reverence for nature, when it was no longer the primary site for occupation and community, influenced how Romantics depicted the human figure in paintings of their time. Often, isolated figures appear proportionately smaller in size relative to their expansive natural surroundings. In this case, Romantics such as Caspar David Friedrich responded to increasingly urban factory-centered job sites and a growing emphasis on rationality and science with paintings that illustrated the human desire to seek individual spiritual, and emotional succor. The sublime encounter was sought in this manner. Present in many Romantic paintings, the sublime is a quality of profound greatness. It refers to an incomparable and incalculable immensity that cannot be

measured or imitated. Often used to refer to nature's vastness, the sublime can also refer to the incredible enormity of cyberspace.

As the Industrial Revolution altered the ways in which nineteenth century Romantic painters depicted human interactions with nature and each other, The Internet Age has profoundly redefined what it means to interact with places and people in the twenty-first century. My work continues the tradition of utilizing the human figure to comment on my specific cultural and historical context. In the work, I reference communication technologies that now present singular people with multiple options for experience. Just as my image sources vary between direct observation and mediated images within a single painting, interpersonal interactions may be direct, filtered through a medium, or even simultaneous. The ability to "be" in multiple spaces at once is facilitated by technologies such as the Internet, cell phones, and other wireless handheld communication devices, all of which present a human being with a virtual vastness of interpersonal links. The work considers the sublime qualities of cyberspace alongside traditional direct, unmediated experiences. In our culture, the "digital sublime" (as described by Vincent Mosco in his book, "The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace") becomes a significant mode of transcending the ordinary physical limitations of time and space, allowing individuals to connect through a medium while remaining geographically disconnected. In my paintings, I aim to expose the psychological alienation that can occur alongside the sublime qualities of this contemporary phenomenon.

II. DISCONNECT

As mediated communication recontextualizes a social exchange, I present an image that redefines the figure/ground relationship. In order to explore the complex nature of navigating multiple channels and in opposition to conventional unified figure/ground relationships, I emphasize disjunction between the figure and his/her environment. Spatial disunity is promoted through the juxtaposition of disparate image sources, shifts in mark making (*Me and You*), chromatic disagreement (*Public Transplant*), discontinuous perspective (*Encounter*), and spatial confusion (*Space-ment*). To construct the painted image, I work from direct observation as well as from mediated images such as web cams and photographs. My pictorial decisions are derived from the specific nature of the image. Each source dictates a distinct type of mark, with a particular type of edge quality, shape, and scale of value and color. In order to play up discordance, I emphasize the differences between these qualities. Within each painting, a range of paint application and mark making oscillates between uniform, flat, rectilinear, controlled and gestural, varied, intuitive, and empathetic with form. For example, in *Me and You* (Fig. 2.1), painting naturalistically from a live model gives organically shaped marks with subtle transitions in mark direction and edge quality that give the illusion of form and texture in plastic space. Marks such as these describe flesh of the body and promote the viewer's understanding of a human likeness of himself or herself. The syntax shifts between figure and surrounding space, between the illusion of physical form and the mimicry of a medium, stress the figure's spatial and psychological detachment from the people around her. Aside from representing physical space with illusion, in

other works such as *Webcam_1* (Fig. 2.2), drips of liquid paint reveal the force of gravity, a presence in the physical world. When paired with more structured marks, drips become even more meaningful, calling upon an Abstract Expressionist vocabulary to communicate emotional and psychological states.



Fig. 2.1 *Me and You*



Fig. 2.2 *Webcam_1*

Photographs or web cams dictate flat, rectilinear marks with uniform edge diffusion. Some of these marks relate to pixels, suggesting the presence of a digital medium, which utilizes a simplified pictorial vocabulary of pixels per inch. Not only do these marks take on the visual characteristics of sources strongly linked to contemporary culture, they also carry contextual meaning. The simplification of visual information indicates an increased distance between the viewer and the original subject. The objectivity of the mediated image distances an individual from experience of the original person or place by the device of representation, which results in visual and mental dislocation. Experiencing through a filter, a photograph, computer screen, surveillance camera, or painting, while linking a person to another person or place through a medium also further reveals the degree of distance between both parties.



Fig. 2.3 *Public Transplant*



Fig. 2.4 *Encounter*

Thematically, the tension between the figure and his/her surroundings reflects the complex nature of interacting with people and places in the 21st century, an age when virtual reality often occurs simultaneously with physical reality. In paintings such as *Public Transplant* (Fig. 2.3) and *Encounter* (Fig. 2.4), this tension occurs largely due to chromatic disagreement between the figure and the environment of the painting. In *Public Transplant*, reds, oranges, and yellows comprise the warm tone of the figure's surroundings while her body and clothing emanate an intense, unnatural neon blue tone. In *Encounter*, the figure's body is comprised of an intense green, whereas the environment around her is much more neutral and warm. The clash in color in these two pieces parallels the collision that occurs when virtual environments overlap into the real world. The neon character and dry application of blue and green also mimics television static or interference, further pointing to the technological side of this phenomenon.

III. RE-CONNECT

In addition to referring to our filtered experiences of each other through various media, the mediated images used in *Space-ment* (Fig. 3.1) also function to introduce a level of ambiguity into the painting. The clarity of the image is inversely related to the size of the image, so by enlarging an original computer thumbnail photograph, clarity is tremendously compromised, forcing the viewer to clarify the image in his/her mind's eye. This is the case with the rightmost and leftmost figure in *Space-ment*. These gaps in recognition are blurs or blips that occur from limitations of image-making technologies combined with multiple translations away from the original image.

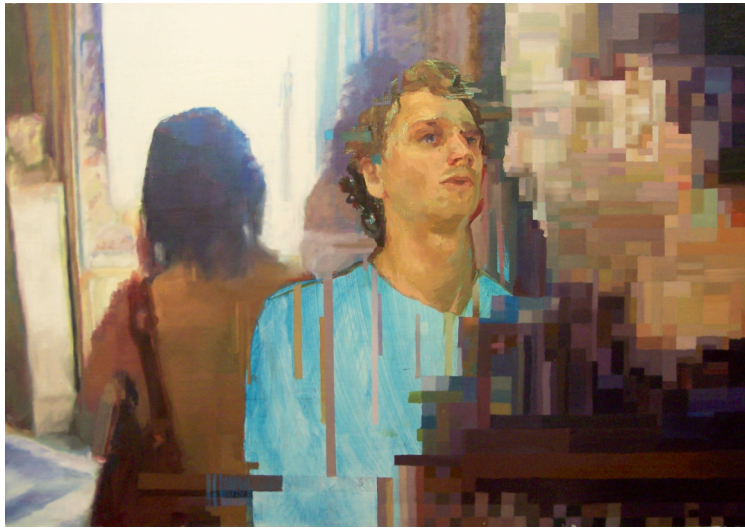


Fig. 3.1 *Space-ment*

They reinforce the presence of the medium, and they force the viewer to impose their own order onto what they see. Rather than provide more clarity (one of the functions of photo-based media), I encourage ambiguity in order to engage the viewer, inviting them to reconnect with the image. The location of these problematized moments relates to the human eye's ability to focus on one object (the central figure) while keeping

other objects in the periphery vision. At the same time, the work also mimics a photograph made with a shallow depth-of-field

In his book, *Interpersonal Divide: The Search for Community in a Technological Age*, Michael Bugeja writes “Truth, like a rainbow contains many colors and hues” (Bugeja 69). In the book, he states that interacting within a physical space, face-to-face, presents an individual with more substance and meaning because it allows a person to experience more layers of sensation. He states that interpersonal skills are influenced by factors such as “eye contact, smell, spatial relationships (seating arrangements, for instance), body movements, time (willingness to wait, pauses in speech), objects (clothing, jewelry, arrangement of furniture), color, the effect of actual light, and intonation. The author argues that virtual habitats and communities only present us with one or two of these layers, a two-dimensional, or one-dimensional experience. Images that are rooted in the virtual are based on a prescribed formula for image translation as opposed to nuance and spontaneity that can be observed in the physical world. They contain polarized value and color, compromised clarity, and uniformity of mark and size. These qualities are not always undesirable, though; often the results of interpolation and aliasing from computer-based images reveal gorgeous effects of lighting and color that that would never be observed in life. I, along with artists like Xie Nanxing, utilize this property the translation of light through mechanical reproduction to indicate the presence of the sublime.

Nanxing, who works and lives in Beijing, creates paintings that are the end result of a long multi-media translation process that begins with video, usually centered on a

dramatic effect of light. The video footage is projected, and then photographed by the artist. Next, the photograph is translated into a gigantic painting without the use of a grid or matrix. Through a meticulous application of four layers of oil paint on photographic paper, the painting is completed. Thus, light is translated from observation, to transmitted image, to projection, to film, to print, and finally to paint. The resulting paintings are complex remediations that display the compounded characteristics of various image-making technologies. Each time the image is captured and recaptured, the light becomes blurrier, more widespread, and more ambiguous until it appears in its final destination. At this point, it seems to rupture the screen that separates the viewer from the image, revealing the presence of the sublime in a blast of light. With this in mind, while information is simplified in remediated or low resolution images, information can be revealed that would otherwise remain hidden.

Such is the case in the painting, “Truth, Like an Illusion” (Fig. 3.2). Here, an individual, painted from direct observation, appears within a severely interpolated virtual environment. The viewer should first recognize this dark space as vast and non-physical. In this painting, the pixels function in two ways: they reference the digital, and also reference the real. On one hand, they are inconsistent in color or size, referencing a live video stream experiencing technical difficulty and thus displaying blurs and blips in the feed. Thus, the pixels reveal a malfunctioning medium, indicating distance and reduced clarity. At the same time, however, the repetition of vertically stacked pixels also implies that the figure is also encountering something physical and tactile like falling water or rain, natural phenomena experienced in the natural world. There is no hierarchy of

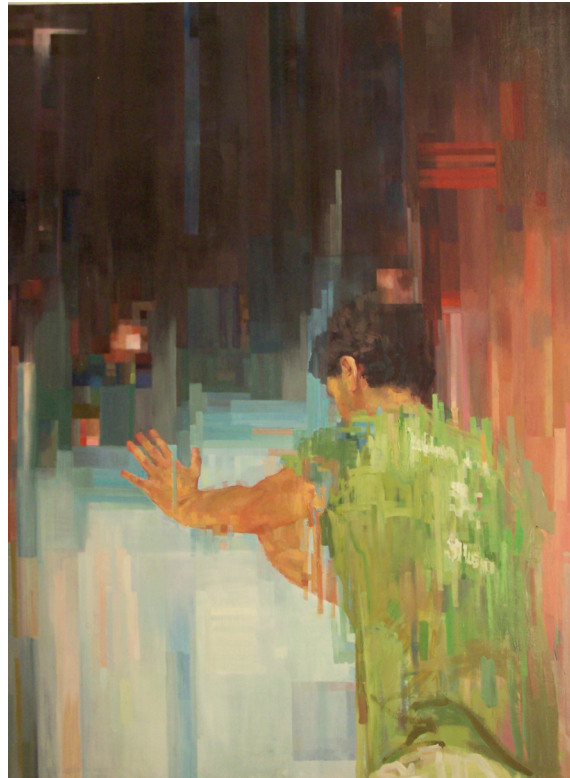


Fig. 3.2 *Truth, Like an Illusion*

experience here; the virtual and physical collide. The result is a sublime encounter by the
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figure, which presses against or in response to the stream. His back is turned away from
the viewer, allowing just enough ambiguity of identity for the viewer to also visualize
that they, too, are participating in the experience.

In this work, the virtual is physical and the physical is also virtual, exemplifying
the complexity of the character of the spaces humans are capable of inhabiting now. The
ambiguity of the situation is compounded by the ambiguity of the space inhabited by the
figure. It is largely up to the viewer to interpret the tone. Is the figure in control of the
stream of visual information or does an immense force greater than his own swallow
him? This most recent work poses questions such as this to the viewer, prompting them

seek an understanding of the complexity of their own experiences and interactions in the twenty-first century.

IV. CONCLUSION

These paintings demonstrate an interest and commitment to the human figure in a way that both accepts the subject's extensive history and asserts its relevance for the present. The work is a product of my love of painting the figure as well as the desire to contribute to a contemporary conversation regarding painting in the twenty-first century. This conversation involves embracing syntactic heterogeneity as well as critically addressing the relationship between new media and traditional artistic practices. The paintings demonstrate this through use of a range of painting language manifesting in shifts in mark making. Marks that fluctuate between flat and rectilinear (referencing computer pixels), and organic and empathetic with form (giving the illusion of form and texture in plastic space) play up differences between figure and ground, complicating conventional figure/ground unity. Figures appear to be detached from their surroundings, reflecting the alienation and psychological distance felt when virtual realities collide with physical ones. Disjunctions caused by chromatic disagreement, shifted perspectives, and shifted mark making play up this disunity. The work speaks not only of the language of painting, but also of the complicated nature of interpersonal interactions today, an age in which people can be highly connected through the use of communication technologies, yet physically and emotionally disconnected. My paintings ask the viewer to consider his/her own places relative to virtual and physical realities, hopefully enabling him/her to reconnect with their surroundings and the people around them.

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